

Chapter 6: Gerd Theissen & The Criterion of Historical Plausibility

In recent years Gerd Theissen, along with co-writers Dagmar Winter and Anne Merz, has put forward a new criterion for historical Jesus research, that of the criteria of 'historical plausibility'.¹ The fullest discussion of this criteria is found in *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus*.

Theissen rejects the Rankean view of history as simply knowing '*history as it actually happened*' (es eigentlich gewesen ist) and instead proposes, in a similar way to N.T. Wright's hypothesis-verification method, that history is best understood as the assessment of plausible scenarios. Plausible comprehensive overviews of the historical Jesus, never arrive at objectivity but are part of the '*hermeneutical circle between the plausibility of a comprehensive picture of Jesus and the plausibility of evaluations about details of his ministry and message*'.² The resultant 'plausible portrait' does 'not constitute a bridge by means of which we can walk Lessing's ugly ditch with dry feet [objectivity], but they provide a kind of life preserver that keeps us from drowning as we swim across the ditch'.³

This plausible portrait is found by rearranging and supplementing rather than 'replacing the traditional criteria'.⁴ He offers the following summary of his criterion.

The combination of different elements in the life of Jesus, who represents a unique constellation in the context of Judaism and at the same time permit's the recognition of a meaningful conjunction with the origin of early Christian - is a criterion of historicity. We speak of comprehensive historical plausibility'⁵

We see here that his new criterion is based simultaneously upon a 'uniqueness' within Judaism, and in this it is similar to CDJ, but also based upon 'continuity', as the

1 Theissen, Gerd ; Winter, Dagmar: *Die Kriterienfrage in Der Jesusforschung : Vom Differenzkriterium Zum Plausibilitätskriterium*. Translated as Theissen, Gerd ; Winter, Dagmar: *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus : The Question of Criteria*. , Theissen, Gerd ; Merz, Annette: *The Historical Jesus : A Comprehensive Guide*.. Discussion of Theissen's methodology is also found in Tom Holmén *Review: The Quest for the Plausible Jesus. The Question of Criteria*. J Theol Studies 55: 216-228, Joel Willits *Presuppositions and Procedures*, J. Study of Historical Jesus 3.1 (2005) pp 88-95, Porter, Stanley E.: *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research : Previous Discussion and New Proposals*. 116-123, also Porter's review of *Quest for the Plausible Jesus* Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, September 2004. Although the main books by Theissen were co-authored I continue to refer to Theissen for sake of textual ease.

2 *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus* 201

3 Ibid. 231

4 Ibid.231

5 Ibid. 190

‘historical Jesus’ influenced and contributed to the development of the early Church.

To understand more fully the criterion of historical plausibility it is necessary to follow his use and fusion of sub-criteria. The overarching criteria is broken down into ‘The Plausibility of Historical Effects’ and ‘The Plausibility of Historical Context’, each of these sub-criteria breaks down into two other supporting criteria, as shown in the table below.

Main Criteria	Sub-Criteria
A) The Plausibility of Historical Effects:	A1) Opposition to the Traditional Bias
	A2) Coherence of Sources
B) The Plausibility of Historical Context	B1) Contextual Appropriateness
	B2) Contextual Distinctiveness

A) The Plausibility of Historical Effects: A historian must draw ‘*contrasting dividing lines*’ between the historical Jesus, Judaism and the early Church. Yet, and in this Theissen critiques an overemphasis on CDC, a correlation must be found with the historical Jesus and the early Church.

A1) Opposition to the Traditional Bias: The CDC is used in a positive way (soft form) to find those elements of Jesus teaching which have been preserved despite the creative tendency of the early Church as ‘*historical credibility belongs accordingly to unintentional evidence that is not influenced by the tendency of the source*’.⁶ This sub-criteria is called the ‘opposition to the traditional bias’.⁷

A2) Coherence of Sources: As with the criteria of coherence⁸ Theissen affirms that ‘*[w]hen sources independently of each other testify to the same event, the prospect that we are dealing with authentic material is enhanced*’.⁹ Theissen, however,

⁶ Ibid. 174

⁷ Similar to Sanders Test 1: Strongly Against the Grain, Sanders and Davies *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* 304-315

⁸ Theissen offers a confusing understanding of the criteria of coherence, as it seems that coherence of sources fits better with the CMA

⁹ Ibid. 177

provides a ‘*new basis for it in the history of Jesus’ effects*’¹⁰, with the assumption that Jesus, along with others factors, influenced the early Church.

The criterion of coherence was used to supplement traditions which had already been identified as authentic, whereas Theissen ‘lay[s] hold of the elements in these sources that recur repeatedly and thus may represent the effect of the historical Jesus’¹¹ His modified form of the criterion of coherence uses sub criteria which are similar to the CMA, in its two fold form of CMS and CMF. Theissen names these criteria ‘cross-section’ and ‘genre constancy’ accordingly.

‘Opposition to the traditional Bias’ (A1) is used alongside the ‘Coherence of Sources’(A2) to grasp different aspects of the history of the effects of Jesus’ life and as it locates that which goes ‘against the stream’ (A1) and that which shows the influence of Jesus, his effects, on the early Church (A2).

B) The Plausibility if Historical Context: The results from A1 and A2 can then be examined further, according to Theissen, by way of ‘contextual plausibility’.

‘Contextual plausibility seeks to discuss, on the one hand whether or not they fit into the Jewish context in which the Jew Jesus of Nazareth lived, and, on the other hand, whether they point to a particular individual within this context’¹²

The criterion of plausibility looks for correspondence with the context (B1) and, also, distinctiveness within the context (B2).

B1) Contextual Appropriateness: Theissen turns the CDJ ‘on its head’¹³ as ‘*as the better a tradition fits into the concrete Jewish context of Palestine and Galilee, the more claim it has to authenticity*’¹⁴.

‘The more an image of Jesus can be made understandable on the basis of its Jewish context as a product of Jewish history, the less we can assume it to be product of early Christian history and imagination.’¹⁵

The more a tradition fits into the context of contemporary events, local

10 Ibid.177

11 Ibid. 177-178

12 Ibid. 179-180

13 Ibid. 180

14 Ibid. 180

15 Ibid. 182-183

circumstances, Jewish traditions, and Jewish mentality, the more confidence develops within us that Jesus cannot be the creation of early Christian imagination.¹⁶

This criteria (B1) by itself could produce a Jesus who does not stand out from his contemporaries, however, when this criteria is used alongside ‘contextual distinctiveness’ (B2) a balance is achieved for Jesus tradition must make sense against the backdrop of Judaism (B1) but also Jesus must in some sense be a distinctive part of the Jewish backdrop (B2). To illustrate his argument Theissen lists four points which have traditionally be seen as a break with Judaism, that of breaking the Sabbath law, challenge to purity laws, the command to let the dead bury their own dead, and criticism of the temple cult. Each of these, Theissen asserts, are ‘*conflicts within Judaism*’¹⁷ and find good precedent from the prophets, Judas the Galilean and John the Baptist. For ‘*there is nothing un-Jewish about charismatic figures whose message provokes conflict with their environment*’¹⁸.

B2) Contextual Distinctiveness: Theissen describe this sub criteria as ‘*looking for distinctive individual traits of Jesus within the framework of the Judaism of his own time-not for singular elements that transcend any historical context*’¹⁹ There are three ways of ascertaining such distinctive individual characteristics a) constructing a comparative profile b) searching for evidence of distinctive features c) establishing individual complexity

a) Constructing a comparative profile: Jesus can be compared with charismatic figures such as Teacher of Righteousness, Judas the Galilean, John the Baptist and the Jewish sign prophets.

b) Searching for evidence of distinctive features: Individual features of Jesus can be identified, using second temple literature, to find distinctive elements.

c) Individual Complexity: The data collected on distinctive features (B2) is combined with a comparative portrait (B1) to ‘get an impression (often intuitively) of a person as a whole’²⁰ This final portrait is a ‘comprehensive historical plausibility’.

16 Ibid. 246

17 Ibid. 180

18 Ibid. 180

19 Ibid. 185

20 Ibid. 187

On following this method Theissen has produced a portrait of Jesus as an itinerant Jewish charismatic who possessed a messianic consciousness and who was the leader of a Jewish renewal movement.

Critique of the 'Criteria of Plausibility'

Criteria or Historical Method

The criteria of authenticity have been traditionally used against the synoptic data to provide a bedrock of authentic tradition. In contrast to this Theissen's criteria do more than this, they not only provide access to authentic tradition (A1, A2) but also seek to interpret this data (B1,B2) to produce a plausible portrait. This is not wrong in itself, but it is misleading to see this as a criteria of authenticity for it is more like a hermeneutical procedure which includes criteria. If we return to the analogy of the work of the historical Jesus scholar as that of a painter we may say that traditionally criteria have been used to decide the colours which will be used in the portrait. Theissen 'criterion' do more than this as they seek to not only choose the palette but give details as to how the paint should be applied.

Use of Questionable Criteria

Theissen relies, although using different terminology, on traditional criteria of CDC (A1), CMF(A2) and CMA (A2). Theissen recognizes that these criteria do not achieve what they set out, yet Theissen continues to use them, in only a slightly modified form, to get at authentic Jesus tradition. Theissen criterion is built on the shaky foundation of his sub-criteria.

As Stanley Porter comments

The significant criticisms of these criteria-and there have been many-are partly responsible for the widespread reliance upon the criterion of double dissimilarity. In other words, Theissen and Winter must do more to establish the usefulness of these other criteria before they can utilize them to create a supposed new criterion ²¹

21 Ibid. 2

Plausibility

In his discussion of criteria Gerd Ludemann dismisses, with only a few sentences, the criterion of plausibility,

*When is all is said and done, for some one thing is plausible, and for others something else. In other words, the criterion of plausibility is too woolly, and leaves more questions than answers.*²²

In agreement with Ludemann, and I even surprised myself when writing that, the plausibility of something is dependent on the observers presuppositions and worldview. What is plausible to a western post-enlightenment observer is going to differ considerably to that a eastern tribal perspective. Likewise if a scholars understand eschatology as other worldly then a Jesus who offers a this-world understanding of the eschaton is implausible. Historical understanding of the life of Jesus will not be fully resolved or gain unanimous consensus as long as schoalrship is pluriform in its worldview and presuppositions.

However, in contrast to Ludemann who seems to be the heir of an objective enlightenment epistemology, historical method can only proceed by producing hypothetical and plausible reconstructions. Plausibility may 'raise more questions' but it can only be countered with a more plausible scenario or by other hypotheses which make better sense of the evidence. Plausibility, or a method of Hypothesis and Verification²³ overcomes the fault-lines of a foundationalist epistemology, and allow the writer to move beyond a naive-realist or an extreme postmodern methodology. Hypotheses and plausibility, seeks a shift away from simply telling it as it was/is (naïve Realism) and more fully recognize that historical knowledge is essentially a mental construct, which can and should find verification from evidence outside of the mind of the researcher.

A hypothesis, as we saw, is essentially a construct, thought up by a human mind, which offers itself as a story about a particular set of phenomena, in which the story, which is bound to be an interpretation of those phenomena, also offers an explanation of them.²⁴

Yet, the questions may rightly be asked, 'What should a plausible portrait of Jesus

22 Ludemann *Jesus after 2000 Years* 5

23 N.T. Wright *New Testament and the People of God*

24 *Ibid.* 99

contain? What is a good hypothesis? How can we tell the difference between plausible and implausible portraits?

Answers cannot be given at length to these questions although in brief form we may say, as with Wright, that a good hypothesis must (I) 'include all the data',²⁵ (II) 'it must construct a basically simple and coherent picture'²⁶ and (III) 'the proposed explanatory story must prove itself fruitful in other related areas, must explain or help to explain other problems'²⁷ The question of this paper concerns itself with the first of these requirements (I) as it is asking the question as to what is meant by the data—what are the authentic words and actions of Jesus.

Chapter 6 Bibliography

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25 Ibid.99

26 Ibid 100

27 Ibid. 100

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